

UNITED STATES SENATE  
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT,  
GOVERNMENT INFORMATION, AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY  
HEARING ON MUSEUMS AND FEDERAL FUNDING

April 5, 2006

QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD SUBMITTED BY  
SENATOR TOM COBURN TO

Dr. David A. Ucko, Head, Informal Science Education, National Science Foundation

Informal Science Education

**QUESTION:** When considering a grant application, does ISE consider their endowment to see if they could fund the project themselves?

**ANSWER:** Funding decisions are made based on the merits of the proposal. The only financial consideration NSF gives in the review and award process is a determination by the Division of Grants and Agreements on whether the grantee institution has the financial capacity to manage the award successfully.

**QUESTION:** Has ISE ever pulled a grant or asked for a refund because a grantee didn't comply with the award conditions? How many times has this happened? Does that disqualify the recipient from ever applying for a grant?

**ANSWER:** We are not aware of a case where an ISE grantee did not comply with the award conditions resulting in termination of the award. The Office of Budget, Finance, and Award Management monitors all NSF awards and conducts reviews; the NSF Office of Inspector General carries out audits. Occasionally, as a result of these reviews and audits, or internal audits conducted by the grantee, certain costs may be disallowed for various reasons, requiring adjustments on the next Federal Cash Transaction Report, or more rarely, a refund by the institution. Unless the issues were pervasive, or very large dollar amounts were disallowed and could not be repaid, or if the grantee refused to take appropriate corrective action, would a recommendation be made to terminate an award or not provide additional awards. We also are not aware of such a situation for an ISE award. There is at least one case, however, in which a recommended award was not made by the Division of Grants and Agreements because it was determined that the institution lacked the financial capability to properly manage federal funds.

**QUESTION:** Do you deny awards to those who are past recipients or put them in a different column?

**ANSWER:** New projects from prior grantees are subject to the same competitive review process as all other proposals. Principal Investigators (PIs) are required, however, to describe the outcomes and impacts of recent previous NSF grants, and reviewers consider that information as part of the merit review process.

**QUESTION:** How do you handle cost overruns if recipients return for more money?

**ANSWER:** ISE does not fund cost overruns.



**QUESTION:** In your testimony you mention that ISE encourages best practices and stimulates innovation. Please explain in more detail with specific examples.

**ANSWER:** ISE encourages best practices through such means as requirements that all projects be guided by the results of educational research and include both formative and summative evaluation. ISE also encourages best practices through national conferences, such as Best Practices in Science Exhibition Development held in 2003 at the Exploratorium in San Francisco. Involving a wide range of science exhibition professionals, from developers, researchers, and managers, to evaluators, educators, and designers, the conference generated a book and other materials for sharing best practices with the museum field.

ISE stimulates innovation by requiring all projects to demonstrate an understanding of the state-of-the-art in the area of their proposal, such as exhibitions, and to demonstrate how their project will advance the field through innovative approaches or deliverables. For example, the California Science Center is embedding live animal habitats within its interactive World of Ecology science exhibition, integrating the best of museum and zoo approaches. Another example is Investigations in Cell Biology in which the Science Museum of Minnesota developed hands-on experiences that engage museum audiences for the first time in cell, microbiology, and molecular biology through open-access, wet-lab, micro-experiment benches.

**QUESTION:** Why do your awards average 3-5 years?

**ANSWER:** ISE typically invests in large projects that require three to five years to design, implement, and evaluate the deliverables being developed, such as a major permanent or traveling exhibition. This process usually involves prototyping or other aspects of formative evaluation with the target audience to help ensure that the final products will achieve their intended educational outcomes.

**QUESTION:** Do you have a grant cap which a single award cannot surpass?

**ANSWER:** The maximum amount for a single ISE award is a total of \$3 million over a period of up to five years.

**QUESTION:** According to your testimony, over 2000-2005 NSF museum funding increased by 67%. Does anyone justify or argue the budget increases with specific reasons, or is an increase assumed yearly, as it is for most government agencies?

**ANSWER:** Funds awarded to museums vary from year-to-year since awards are based on the merits of proposals submitted rather than a predetermined dollar amount. Most of the increase resulted from an unusually low figure for non-ISE awards to museums in FY 2000. If that first year is dropped, the increase is 17 percent from 2001 to 2005. For ISE awards to museums over the entire six year period (FY 2000-2005), the increase in funding for museums was 20 percent. It should be noted that during this period, the numbers of proposals submitted to the ISE program approximately doubled. This greater number of proposals resulted in a lower funding rate, which is currently 17 percent, lower than the NSF average of about 23 percent for all proposals in FY 2005.

**QUESTION:** Are the review panel expenses (per diems, etc.) included in the overall ISE budget or do those fall under the administrative budget of NSF?

**ANSWER:** Review panel per diems are included in the overall ISE budget.